

Radicalism in French culture: a sociology of French theory in the 1960s / Niilo Kauppi

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Deskripsi Dokumen: <http://lib.ui.ac.id/opac/ui/detail.jsp?id=20357015&lokasi=lokal>

Abstrak

The purpose of this sociological study is to examine the social and semiotic process whereby a unique form of theoretical and political radicalism (later labeled French theory) was forged in France or more precisely Paris in the second part of the 1960s. A cultural revolution provided the background for this radicalism. this cultural revolution undermined the old social conventions and social relationships of authority and power (Hobsbawn 1999: 334) and created new types of intellectual identities. this development was embedded in broader social and economic transformations that affected key social institutions such as the university (Bourdieu 1984, Kauppi 1996). All parts of French society were touched by these developments. Some major transformations took place in French culture with the nouveau roman in literature, the new wave of French cinema, and intellectual production with radical ideas that were later labeled French theory.

The internal sociological analysis of ideas and styles of thought by showing that the defining but largely neglected feature of what has become 'French theory' is a collective mind and style, with an explosive but fragile mixture of scientific and political radicalism. This will be a key text for social theorists and those interested in popular media culture within France.

Theoretical radicalization took the form of an arms race of increasing bidding, of an escalation in the frequency of breaking the rules of the established game (philosophy of transgression) that quickly outpaced the logic of political radicalism. a pathology of radicalism started to develop in intellectual life that could be distinguished from the normalcy of rational debate. they had different ends: escape through feedback into indeterminacy and the critique of the French bourgeois order.

While the first part of the work analyzes the fusion of these partly contradictory logics in various productions, the second part of this work focuses on the very different forms symbolic divergence took in the theories produced in the 1960s. the symbolic caution provided by the French communist Party gradually, and very unevenly, disappears. This increase of the (relative) internal heterogeneity of this collective mind and style of thought turned into an integration of some of the rebels into the university and literary establishments and of a political dilution of their radical message into a variety of marginal leftist narratives.